

Polish myths and their deconstruction in the context of Polish-Jewish relations

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Summary

Aim. The aim of this paper is to outline the basic threads of Polish mythology that are central for understanding of the Polish-Jewish relations. It was written in the context of stormy and painful discussions held within the frame of Polish-Israeli Mental Health Association between 2002 and 2004. The Association, founded in 1999 by, among others, late professor Adam Szymusik and professor Maria Orwid, wished to deepen understanding of mutual relations by touching upon taboo issues, breaking stereotypes, being ready to initiate work on the memory and to confront unspoken events of common history. The important element of this process was the necessity to refer to the frame of the traditional Polish national identity. The text was presented at the fifth Polish-Israeli Symposium of the Association in June 2004 in Krakow. The authors recently decided to work on it and to present it, convinced that the issues surrounding and related to the Polish identity should be the subject of an ongoing wide debate and reflection.

Discussion. The vivid presence of the Polish myths in the social space and their defensive functions are exemplified by, inter alia, stormy reception of Gross's book „Strach” (“Fear”) published in 2008, and on the other hand, by the processes taking place in our country after the Polish President's plane crash near Smoleńsk. The paper describes the basic Polish myth and its influence on Polish-Jewish mutual relationships and understanding the past and the present.

Conclusion. Work on memory is ongoing often painful process which should be done among all social groups including groups of professionals that are interested in developing Polish-Israeli Mental Health Association.

Polish-Jewish relations, Polish myths

When a myth becomes a daydream it is judged, found wanting and must be discarded. To cling to it when it has lost its creative function is to condemn oneself to mental illness.

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Reaching for concealed, forgotten subjects that are considered secret and taboo is always a complex process that requires a lot of time. This is why perhaps it is not surprising that in the course of our Polish-Israeli seminars there has

not yet been a paper which would directly analyse the Polish-Jewish relations in the context of painful problems connected with anti-Semitism and the attitude of the Poles to the Holocaust. On the other hand, if it is so difficult to say and hear what has been stifled even in this environment, so open to dialogue and through its professional education ready to deal with trauma, it is easier to understand how hard this process may be when it takes place on a general scale in the society.

Understanding Polish-Jewish relations in their historical complexity is impossible without refer-

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ring to the construction of Polish identity in the context of myths which helped create it. Therefore, the aim of this presentation is to outline this problem.

Myths have an undisputable significance in the creation and preservation of the identity of peoples, families, social groups, nations or lastly civilizations. Many play a formative role in culture and become the axis of development, enabling survival in extreme situations. But as we well know, there are also "toxic" myths which reveal their destructive power if they are cultivated. There are others that were meaningful and necessary for years but became anachronistic and dysfunctional with time.

In Poland, which did not exist as a sovereign country for over a hundred years, myths had a special significance. Polishness was based not so much on institutions, monuments, offices, and laws but rather on symbols and unofficial mythical stories recounted to raise peoples' spirits. The mythic symbolism centred on various themes: being part of the Western world, peripherality (Poland as an outpost of Europe), Christianity, Polish nobility being descended from ancient Sarmatian ancestry. But the most vivid myth and the one that helped to construct Polish identity was based on romantic culture. This myth had its own determinants, its functions and culminations; its most recent representation built the ethos of the Solidarity Trade Union between 1980-1981. Alive until practically today, contested for years, yet it succeeded in forming the Polish memory and determined the way of collective life. Its opponents wrote about the power of a national collective, the terror of the collective, the blackmailing by the Polish sacred symbols, relishing national suffering. As Czesław Miłosz sarcastically said: "You have splendid architecture, art, technology, riches, yes, but we have so many corpses!" [1]. Exaltation of suffering and sacrifice is the basic element of the romantic myth: "Poland as the Christ of the nations" and "being nailed down by innocent victims". The victims are innocent and noble and their sacrifice takes on a nearly religious character.

In the complex Polish mythology, there are a few significant narratives that have particular meaning in the context of Polish-Jewish issues.

A story about suffering and sacrifice

This myth, reinforced by consecutive unsuccessful military uprisings for independence, made defeats and sacrifices of blood a sort of attribute of Polishness. Its existence freed one from the responsibility for decisions, political mistakes, wrong strategies (including those which led to the loss of independence), absolved from criticism and reflections about individual choices and their influence, created an ethos which allowed to retain dignity when faced with fiascos. Simultaneously, accepting the role of a victim made it possible to concentrate on one's own perspective without noticing the suffering of the others, or sometimes even questioning their suffering. From here, it is very close to the assumption of equivalence between the wartime situation of the Poles and the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust or even to belittling their tragedy. By usurping "messianism of suffering" [2] it has been difficult for the Poles to accept the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, and repeat with Levinas: "out of millions of human beings who suffered poverty and death at that time, the Jews had been through the unique experience of total solitude" [3].

A story about innocence

The "suffering" myth described above appears along with a myth about Polish innocence, nobility and tolerance. It is obviously self-idealising and portrays the others as stereotypes. It appears in many different contexts. It is especially manifested when trying to ascribe various pogroms, crimes and denunciations to dregs and outcasts of society in order to retain an image of "a good Pole," who would risk his life to save the others. At the same time it marginalizes and excludes of those, whose behaviour would threaten to undermine the myth. Tokarska-Bakir [4], analyzing the reactions of historians to Gross's book about the crime in Jedwabne¹, writes about this myth as a kind of obsession with Polish innocence showing that "Polish anti-Semitism of

¹ Gross J.T. Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka. Sejny: Wydawnictwo Pogranicze; 2000; Gross J.T. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland 2001, by Princeton University Press

good and gentle people who close the subject of the Holocaust before it is even opened, who exaggerate every unfair Jewish voice and conceal a justified opinion" [4] has its sources in the desire to retain an image of Poland as a paradise of tolerance, an idyllic place. In her texts she precisely analyses how revealing that Poles killed Jews started a chorus of denials to retain their own "memory" or rather the memory of a myth ("Poles don't murder, they may sometimes kill in self-defence, however it is they who are often murdered") [4].

A story about loneliness and lack of understanding

The Polish myth, the Polish memory is a local matter, saturated with its own emotions, legends, and nightmares. These have not been included in the treasury of universal symbols as opposed to the Jewish Extermination. The symbols of national tragedies such as Katyn, Armia Krajowa (the Home Army), the Warsaw Uprising and Auschwitz have been, in the eyes of the supporters of the myth, either ignored by the world or appropriated by the Jews, as happened in the case of Auschwitz. And so the defence of the Polish point of view is the main duty of a Pole. Negating the heroic vision of the history of Poland is an attack on Poland. Therefore, the Jewish memory becomes a danger to the country.

A story about life in "a besieged fortress" and betrayal

If enemies start circling around, defense of Polishness is the main obligation of a Pole. This element of the myth is responsible for making a fetish out of Polish memory, which then lacks the space to notice suffering of the others.

The fall of the great and strong country inhabited by a brave nation in the war of 1939 was a tremendous shock (the Chief of State on the eve of the Second World War declared "We will not give even a button to the Germans"). Such a tragedy begged an explanation – Germans, Jews or Ukrainians were perfect for that role. Those, who betrayed by shooting Polish soldiers in the back and welcomed Soviet invaders with bread and salt. Minorities that interwar Poland treat-

ed badly suddenly were accepted, expected to show loyalty and accused of betraying Polish interests.

A story about Polishness defined by religion

The myth of a Catholic Pole, the necessity to defend the faith against Dissenters, and later against communist atheism destroyed the republican concept of a country as a multi-ethnic political community. This myth helped the development of an integral nationalism which identified the state with Polishness and Catholicism. And so, the defence of the monastery located on the site of the Auschwitz camp became the defence of Poland and belonging to the society became conditioned by national and religious affiliation. During the war, the Jews, due to their different religion, found themselves beyond the sphere of Polish responsibility because they were commonly regarded as strangers.

A story about the intelligentsia

The myth of the Polish intelligentsia was connected with the sense of a social mission, the idea of leadership and mobilizing the society to take action. It was intimately bound with the feeling of this group's superiority and self-confidence and even the role of the saviour. The intelligentsia is the repository of stores, ideas including the Polish myths; it is their guardian, the controller of the Polish books and paintings, the bearer of historical memory. The anti-Semitism of a large portion of the pre-war but also the post-war Polish intelligentsia, the fact that ideas transferred by them from generation to generation also included xenophobic and anti-Semitic values, remains a taboo.

Polish myths and Polish-Jewish discourse

We feel that the myths we have outlined deform history. The place of history is occupied by a glorifying or compensatory legend constructed on archetypal templates. Today we realize with greater humility that "history" is not so much knowledge as the "creation of various memories

and constructions, even fiction. It is created in the course of an argument concerning what actually should be forgotten, it does not emerge from "facts", which have to be recalled to find oneself on the right side" [5]. Cultivating, strengthening and mythologising of one "history" destroys others which cannot become "histories" themselves.

We are convinced that Polish romantic myth has influenced Polish-Jewish relations and their subsequent perception, as well as the Polish memory, or should we say the Polish lack of memory, concerning the Holocaust.

Going back to the facts, a discussion to deconstruct myths, it could be called a Polish-Polish discussion, clearly preceded honest narrations about Polish-Jewish relations. The most famous Polish writers, including Miłosz, Gombrowicz, Różewicz, Mrozek and many others, have fought against national myths. Their claims about the "threat of Polishness", their juxtaposition of a human being and a Pole and de-falsifying history created scandals, press campaigns, indignation of the "war-veterans community", and ostracism. And yet, in intellectual circles, the de-mythologizing discussion was so strong that a famous book by Zbigniew Żałoski [6] was published in 1962. It was the only reaction against "historical sneer" in the communist block, a book defending national history against "anti-historic plots".

A de-mythologizing discussion about Polish-Jewish relations appeared much later and apparently even today causes more heated emotions and resistance than the "internal Polish" de-mythologizing discussion. Its key elements include:

- a double edition of a Catholic monthly magazine entitled *Znak* in 1983, wholly devoted to the Jewish issues [7];
- a dispute which started in 1985 concerning the Christian commemoration of Auschwitz about a monastery located on the site of the camp and later, the so-called papal cross;
- a 1986 Claude Lanzmann's film entitled *Shoah* shown on Polish TV in a drastically shortened version, perceived by many as aggressively anti-Polish;
- a collection of articles first published in London in 1986 and reprinted in an underground publishing house in Poland about the Polish-

- Jewish relations, revolutionary in openly dealing with difficult Polish-Jewish relations [8];
- an article by Jan Błński printed in 1987 in a Catholic weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny* entitled "Poor Poles looking at the Ghetto" which contained a thesis about the Poles being partly responsible for the Extermination by renouncing action or unsatisfactory counteraction, and a description of Polish indifference as well as a blocking out of the Polish memory connected with the Holocaust [9];
- the publication of accounts of the Kielce pogrom in Polish newspapers and magazines starting in 1988;
- a 1994 article by Michał Cichy from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the influential daily newspaper with wide circulation, about the killing by the soldiers of the Polish Underground State of several dozen Jews during the Warsaw Uprising [10];
- the publication in 2000 of a book "Neighbours" by Jan Tomasz Gross about the inhabitants of a small Polish town of Jedwabne who murdered their Jewish neighbours and a stormy discussion surrounding this publication that was present in all the media [11].

An examination of even such a general list makes one conclude that:

First of all, the de-mythologizing discussion which started in the Catholic press or underground publishing houses of limited circulation has been gradually expanding and becoming a social fact through its presence in popular media.

Secondly, although each of the media facts listed above caused heated controversy and triggered xenophobic and defensive reactions, the discussion has become more and more open every year. The early 'discovery' of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a place of torture primarily of Jews, or the assertion of the general indifference of the Polish wartime society to the Jewish Extermination do not shock nowadays. The Polish identity is, at present, trying to cope with the problem of Polish participation in the Holocaust, either directly by murdering, like in Jedwabne and in other villages of the Podkarpacie region, or by blackmailing and denouncing people in hiding.

And yet the attempts at deconstructing the Polish myth and the emergence of the Jews from silence and non-existence, have also increased confusion in the society. In 2002 professor Krzemiński and his team repeated a sociological study of 1992. To the researchers' surprise after a dozen years of free media, public discussions, two years after the publication of the Jedwabne murders, anti-Semitism has visibly grown. Attitudes have polarized, 1/3rd of surveyed people exhibited intensified anti-Semitism, and attitudes, described by the authors as anti-Semitic, have increased. The group willing to revise the memory has been growing, but remains in evident minority. For 80% of surveyed people, Auschwitz was a place of death for people of many nationalities, for 16%, it was a place of death for mostly Jews. And only 8% of the people polled responded that Poles could have done more to save the Jews [12].

The Polish romantic mythology is defending itself against a flood of deconstructing facts.

How can it be interpreted? A general and multi-level mythologization of Polish-Jewish relations stems from several factors.

First of all, in a democratic society there are numerous group memories that are always in conflict. However, in Poland there is no Jewish community, so there is no "natural" source of a different memory.

Secondly, Poland has been a democratic country for only about a dozen years, and earlier, particularly after 1968, an honest discussion about Jews was impossible. History, both Polish and Polish-Jewish, was politically manipulated. Immediately after gaining independence the society feasted on its own secret history, primarily Polish suffering under the communist rule. The earlier hidden, underground, "family" trend, standing in opposition to the official, (i.e. communist, history, and glorifying the Polish "anti-communist" history, and interwar Poland, was finally heard. And with it came a fossilized, unverifiable ideas, not discussed for years ideas and transferred directly from the 1930's; ideas that, with some simplification, can be called nationalistic.

Thirdly, there is nothing to solidify and evoke the memory of the Jews, there are no monuments, and those which exist do not focus on

memory. There is no living memory, and even films important for the historical identity of the West are not remembered. Claude Lanzmann's Shoah was considered an anti-Polish film, and reflections over Spielberg's Schindler's List were dominated by euphoria over the success of this partly Polish film.

Fourthly, the memory of the Holocaust cannot exist as it is a traumatic memory. The Polish trauma is adoube one. It is a trauma of a witness. The trauma of a contact with something unbelievable, incomprehensible, terrible. With mass executions in the streets and squares of Polish towns. With the Extermination which happened not so much next to us, but among us, among our parents and grandparents. It is also a trauma of questioning Polish identity.

And so, fifthly, adopting Jewish memory threatens to deconstruct Polish romantic myth. And to do that on several levels.

Jews have been important for the Polish identity for a long time. They most completely and extensively symbolized the Stranger, the Other, the person from whom one had to differ, who represented values contradictory to our values, who was therefore dangerous. They symbolized the other dark side of the Polish myth. This is how they were clearly positioned on the axis of good and evil. On one side of the axis, patriotism, bravery, Poland the Christ of Nations, nobility, Polishness; on the other, calculation, cowardice, indifference to the fate of the country, "subversiveness".

During the war many people could not adapt to the heroic template of the Polish myth: the countryside lucratively traded food with the starving cities, Arian shopkeepers took over shops of their murdered neighbours, denouncing letters were written, those in hiding were blackmailed. People were afraid of the Germans, and they, in front of the eyes of surprised observers, introduced a "new order," new hierarchies and new rules and policies. They murdered Jews. Established world order, moral norms, social hierarchies collapsed and were undone. But the human being keeps searching for some sense; searches with anxiety and determination, especially if he is a witness to a traumatic and incomprehensible experience. The Extermination of the Jews had to be explained. Traditional culture

reached to its own resources looking for some kind of justification and reason in religion ("His blood is on us and our children"). Ideology or "pragmatism" ("we should build a monument to Hitler for what he did with Jews") could serve as a good explanation as well. Jews who had been considered enemies "since forever" by dying became mortal enemies. The Polish accompaniment of the Extermination has reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes. The Polish accompaniment of the Extermination depraved, and the Holocaust created particular tension around all basic assumptions of the Polish myth.

Polish myths are not favourable to Polish memory of the Jews. According to Tokarska-Bakir: "Our memory is a place where there are no Jews" [13]. Jews were quickly forgotten, it was an active forgetting supported by defence mechanisms. Already in 1949 Maria Dąbrowska, a famous Polish writer, watching a film entitled *Ulica Graniczna*, in which a Jewish child experiences panic fear on the Arian side, notes that it is "not typical for the relations at the time" and that "in a period when Jewish children sneaked out from the Ghetto, and the streets of Warsaw were full of them, the threat of handing them over to the Germans was an exception" [14]. For years only such a "truth" was available to the Poles.

FINAL REMARKS

It is a fact that there has been no place for reliable and honest description of the Polish-Jewish relations. For year in the Polish social discourse there were no voices of Jewish victims. The analysis of the Polish myths, although much needed, is not sufficient to understand the social reactions we observe in Poland when dealing with "Jewish" issues. It is helpful to use the postmodern reflection which allows a critical perspective on the culture responsible for the greatest traumas of the twentieth century. The postmodern reflection, by questioning modern narrations and revising their assumptions, allows the muted, inconvenient and uncomfortable voices to be finally heard. It questions the "history" written by the historians and opts for the memory of the victims. This process, observed until the late 80's, was described by LaCapra [15] as the rise of

post-traumatic culture in opposition to the earlier culture of silence. Denied, hidden, unspoken and unspeakable traumatic experiences "return and revise the current reality" [13].

And so, we can observe in recent years a social phenomenon called post-memory. Hirsch says: "post-memory is a feature of the experience of people who grew up in the shadow of stories about events which had taken place before their birth. Their own memories had to give way to stories of the previous generations formed in traumatic conditions, which were never fully understood or reconstructed" [13]. This process is also beginning to slowly include the Polish context.

The French historian, Pierre Nora [16], when analyzing complex processes that take place in the post-traumatic culture, points out to a phenomenon he describes as "marginalization of history" [17]. Nora understands this process as historians' loss of monopoly to describe the past. The phenomenon he describes is a triumph of both an individual and group memory over the history understood as an academic subject that stands in opposition to fallible individual memory. It touches upon another significant problem characteristic of the modern culture of memory. The perspective for examining history has been changing. "More and more often the past is perceived through the prism of the victims' and not the torturers' experience. For a long time research on totalitarianism was focused on an analysis of powers structures of crime mechanisms and dictators. Today those who were caught in the gears of corrupt history appear to be more interesting" [17]. And so, as Michael Jeismann claims, the past has become something of an individual examination of conscience: "How would I behave if faced with a crime?" [18].

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